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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES TARGETED FOR HARASSMENT AND  
POSSIBLE PERSECUTION

REF: 08 MOSCOW 1213

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle for reason 1.4(d)

11. (C) Summary. Over the past several months, two regional courts have charged the Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) of Russia with distributing extremist literature, and the Russian General Prosecutor has ordered a full investigation of JW religious activity, in coordination with the FSB. Local police and FSB officials interrupted JW religious ceremonies and individual members subsequently received burdensome and intrusive information requests. No other religious groups in Russia have experienced a similarly intense period of scrutiny in recent months. JW representatives believed that an "anti-cult" organization loosely affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) instigated the investigation, just days after the inauguration of ROC Patriarch Kirill. Human Rights Ombudsman Lukin has refused to meet with JW officials three times in the past several years, calling any such meeting a "dangerous situation." Lukin's deputy covering religious affairs warned us about United Russia party efforts to revise the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience to combat extremism. The Ambassador underscored strong concern over the targeting of JW with Presidential Human Rights Council Chairperson Pamfilova and plans to raise the issue in an upcoming meeting with Patriarch Kirill. End Summary.

Targeted for Legal Action?

12. (C) On February 26, Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) attorney Marc Hansen, JW Presiding Committee Chairman Vassiliy Kalin, and JW Presiding Committee member Yaroslav Sivulskiy told us that Russian First Deputy Prosecutor General Aleksandr Buksman issued an assignment to regional prosecutor offices to investigate the legality of the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses' religious activity in Russia. Buksman requested that regional prosecutor offices cooperate with the FSB, Ministry of Justice, public health departments and organizations, and military commissars to provide a full account of JW violations by February 18. Hansen learned about the coordinated review after receiving a copy of a letter from the Moscow Region Prosecutor's Office dated February 13, issued to all Moscow city, district, and special prosecutor's offices. The letter signed by First Deputy Regional Prosecutor Aleksandr Ignatenko tasked all regional offices to take prosecutorial measures, wherever grounds for action existed, and chastised JW's missionary activity, social isolation, teachings to avoid military service, and refusal to receive blood transfusions as fostering a "negative relationship to the population and traditional Russian confessions." A similar order issued by Sakhalin Region First Deputy Prosecutor Vladimir Minigorayev on February 2 called on territorial police departments, FSB, and Ministry of Justice officials to organize an investigation of any JW violations of Federal Law 125 on Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Communions of 1997. Ignatenko's request acknowledged that JW registered with the Ministry of Justice

in 1999 and has over 400 communities in Russia subordinate to the Administrative Center.

13. (C) As a result of the Russian Prosecutor General's assignment, several Jehovah's Witnesses chapters received court orders to provide information about the organization's activities. JW chapters in Solnechnodolsk (Stavropol Territory), Angarsk (Irkutsk Region), and Sarapul (Udmurt Republic) received requests for legal documents on chapter registration, member lists, details on religious events and practices, real estate documentation, bank account records, and details on chapter management decisions. All of the orders, issued between February 13 and 17, requested a full accounting from JW chapters by February 18. A fourth chapter in Belokurikha (Altai Territory) received a court order on February 18 for information on all chapter members who applied for marriage annulments from 2004 to the present.

#### Vague Extremism Charges

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14. (C) Russian authorities charged Jehovah's Witnesses in Altai Territory and Rostov Oblast with extremism in early 2009, prompting a flurry of legal activity from both sides. On February 26, Andrik told us that there had been positive developments in the Salsk (Rostov Oblast) court proceeding that charged JW with the production and dissemination of 12 pieces of extremist literature (as opposed to 27 in Altai). Andrik noted that the Salsk prosecutor lacked evidence proving the extremist nature of JW religious literature, and added that the prosecutor never claimed in the proceedings that JW literature is actually extremist, only that it "could

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be" or "might be used as" extremist literature. The Salsk prosecutor, whom Hansen described as inexperienced, promised to discuss the evidence with her superiors before the next court hearing on March 12.

15. (C) While no decisions in the Gorno-Altai (Altai Territory) case had been made, JW representatives described their chances of success as "comparably poor." Hansen attributed part of JW's problems in Gorno-Altai to the rural characteristics of the region, conceding that more traditional bureaucrats likely will rule against them. While Andrik and Hansen applauded the judge's decision to allow them access to the prosecutor's files, they pointed to a problematic 49-page study conducted by a Gorno-Altai university that claimed JW engaged in "mind control" activities. While JW challenged the admissibility of the study, performed over a three day period in January 2009, Hansen believed that cost and time constraints would prevent the judge in Altai from ordering a second evaluation. Hansen offered that a quick review of the lists of the so-called "extremist" magazines and books showed that none of the publications singled out in Salsk and Gorno-Altai overlapped, calling into question the uniformity of criteria used by these courts in the review process. (Note: Andrik stated that there are only 150,000 registered members of JW in Russia, but twice that many attend services. End Note).

#### Harassment in Kazan, St. Petersburg

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16. (C) Sivulskiy told us on February 26 that the St. Petersburg office of the JW had received hundreds of calls from members complaining about government harassment in schools and worship services. He said that local police and FSB agents recently visited elementary school classes and asked teachers to indicate which students were members of Jehovah's Witnesses, subsequently approaching the children for information about their lifestyles. Law enforcement officials singled out no other "minority" students. In Tatarstan, FSB agents interrupted a JW worship service and asked for identification from each parishioner, preventing the observation of their normal practices. Such incidents

compelled JW leaders to appeal to Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin in past years, but Sivulskiy said that Lukin's rejection of the last three meeting requests as a "dangerous situation" hardly encouraged JW representatives to try again.

#### Government Expert Wary About Current Trend

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17. (C) Mikhail Odintsov, Head of the Department of Religious Affairs in the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, told us on January 20 that "all things are possible in Russia" regarding changes on religious freedom, and characterized the current environment for non-Orthodox groups as a "return to the Soviet Union." Odintsov cited the legal problems of the Jehovah's Witnesses, property disputes facing the Baptists, a Justice Ministry lawsuit against a Pentecostal seminary, and visa problems restricting missionaries as examples of hardships facing many religious groups in Russia. Concerning the cases currently facing JW, Odintsov cited past European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) decisions in 1993, 2000, and 2001 which confirmed the legal rights of the JW, as well as the ECHR ruling on the complaint "Kuznetsov and Others vs. Russia" which dismissed government charges against JW in Rostov region in November 2007 as a breach of article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. That said, he believed that the scale of the campaign suggested higher powers at play.

#### Russian Orthodox Church Tied to Harassment?

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18. (C) Andrik told us on January 28 that an organization associated with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) provided the main impetus for action against Jehovah's Witnesses. In documents provided to the ECHR regarding the investigations of the JW Administrative Center, he pointed to the Committee for Salvation of Youth from Destructive Cults (the Committee) and the Vologda Regional Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Non-Traditional Religions as the sources of hostility. Andrik noted that ECHR itself recognized in 2003 that "the Committee," led by Alla Zhavoronkova, is connected to the ROC. According to Andrik, the Moscow General Prosecutor's office liquidated "The Moscow Community of Jehovah's Witnesses" as a legal entity in 2002 in a court case initiated by a complaint brought by "The Committee." Hansen openly suggested on February 26 that Patriarch Kirill could be behind the push, citing Kirill's past statements in opposition to non-Orthodox Christians and sects, as the JW

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have been labeled. Sivulskiy also unveiled his suspicions, highlighting the surge of activity against JW immediately after Kirill's enthronement.

#### Changes in 1997 Law Forthcoming?

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19. (SBU) The recent surge in acts of extremism and nationalist violence has prompted Russian authorities to promise increased surveillance, and could lend to heavy-handed regulation of non-mainstream organizations. On December 2, a United Russia expert consultative council recommended the adoption of an anti-extremist project, which included changes in the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations. Religious organizations would be forced to present data about the faith's foundations, the history of its formation, and the "methodology" of its activity. Also subject to scrutiny would be the religion's outlook on family and marriage, health care for its followers, education, and requirements for membership. The United Russia bill stated that any changes to an organization's educational program must be reviewed and registered by authorities, ostensibly broadening these authorities' powers for subjective interpretation and restriction on religious activities.

Comment

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¶10. (C) The crisis-driven government campaign against extremism will prod Russian bureaucrats to pick easy targets as trophies of their efforts. Ella Pamfilova, the newly re-appointed head of Medvedev's Council on Promoting the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights told Ambassador March 4 that the JW should appeal to Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin, and that although the Council is not set up to take complaints, she welcomed them to speak with her and other members of the council, including representatives from Moscow Helsinki Group and Memorial, who could also be approached. The Ambassador plans to raise the issue in an upcoming meeting with new ROC Patriarch Kirill, to gauge his personal views and advocate greater tolerance and acceptance. We will actively engage with our contacts in the Russian government, human rights community, and religious circles for more clarity on this issue. End Comment.  
BEYRLE